

Safety Tip of the Month (Gary Guenther)

The topic, for lack of a better term, is “head gear”. Not surprisingly, there is a wide variation in what we, as woodturners, wear to protect ourselves, and the circumstances under which we wear it.

All forms of woodturning can be dangerous, but some situations are clearly more hazardous than others. A spindle blank does not have as high a probability for disaster as an irregular 30-pound chunk of tree with some of the bark still on. Most woodturners weigh safety in terms of comfort and convenience – sometimes to the detriment of safety.

Personally, I would never turn anything without a face shield, any more than I would drive in a car without a seat belt on. I have taught myself to be uncomfortable with a hunk of wood spinning near my face, with a rim speed of 20-30 mph, without at least a plastic shield in between. Eye protection, in the form of safety glasses, or better, goggles, is an absolute MUST, and I suspect that the large majority of turners honor this. But is that really enough? Perhaps it is for small spindles, but for turning side grain, I would posit that it is not.

My reason for this comment, and, indeed, the reason for this article, is a recent example cited on the Wood Central forum. Without getting into details, let's just say that a turner unaccountably thought that a face mask would not be a sufficient deterrent, wore only goggles, and consequently got some significant facial damage unnecessarily. The reaction to his post was partly of the “sorry to hear about that” type, but a number of others replied with the observation that his face would not have been damaged at all had he been wearing a face shield. Several responders cited specific instances where they had received considerable whacks in the face without any damage due to the fact that they had been wearing their face shields. Frankly, I cannot understand how one would feel otherwise. This applies to grinding tools, as well. Wheels can, on occasion, crack and break, and I seriously doubt if you want a piece of that up your nose at 40 mph.

Then there is the question about what to wear at a demo. Many turners who wear face masks at home will turn with only safety glasses because they can't talk with the shield on and it's an inconvenience putting it up and down over and over again. My personal opinion is that this is an unnecessary risk. A good example is Bill Grumbine. As a demonstrator, he wears his helmet when turning end grain even though he thought he would never launch an object. Well, those of us who attended his recent CAW demo saw that propeller come lose and bloody his arm. Even if it had hit him in the face, he would have been safe. He turns, and he talks, but not at the same time. Given the concentration sometimes required, perhaps that's not such a bad idea. I think we should strongly encourage our demonstrators to wear face shields for side-grain work.

I won't get into allergies, dust, masks, air helmets, etc., but it is clear that there are further considerations here.

One final thought: I have become aware of a danger that very few of us protect ourselves from. If you look at a typical baseball catcher, you will see that they wear neck protection. A foul ball, or a hunk of maple burl, in the throat could be fatal. I guess we're ignoring the risk because a solution would be uncomfortable and inconvenient. I think I'd be more comfortable with some protection there. Maybe someone will think up a way. Meanwhile, stay out of the line of fire!

Happy and SAFE turning!